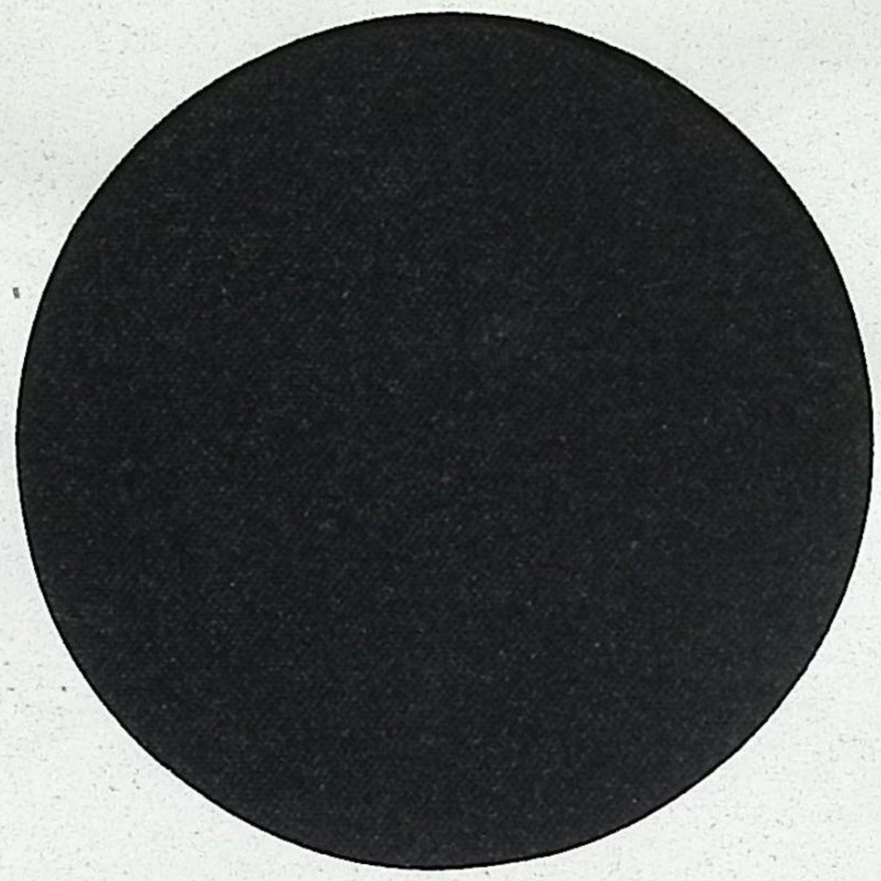
The Ideal Minister

By CHARLES CUTHBERT HALL

"WHEREVER a man arises of such simple excellence that the people dare to trust him, and preaches, without ecclesiastical accent, a Gospel of the Living God that appeals to life, and an interpretation of life that leads men to the Living God—that man never lacks an audience, an influence and an answer from human souls. The common people hear him gladly. The preoccupied ear of culture is arrested by his words. The blood of high-minded youth leaps beneath his message. The storm-swept heart of sorrow listens and finds peace. What is the meaning of this phenomenon—this hungry response that men give to whosoever, coming in the name of Christ, combines with a just and manly life the power of interpreting God to man and man to himself? It means that, as artificial and provisional conceptions of the ministry dissolve before the searching realism of an age of democracy and an age of science, the ministry itself is justified by the unstudied verdict of human experience. Humanity outgrows its priests but not its prophets."



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The Ideal Minister.

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DECEIVED by popular indifference to churches and priests, some noble-spirited young men have withheld themselves from the ministry, honestly doubting whether religion is not a waning fire in the modern world, whether the altar of man's communion with God is not in the way of being thrown aside by ethical reform and social service. The apostles of secularism, by whom these young men have been influenced, have much to answer for. They have confused the issue. No one could blame them for criticising ecclesiastical unrealities and the sophistries of clericalism. But when, deliberately or in unconscious error, they speak against religion and teach our younger men that the world is outgrowing it, they sin against the very Spirit of God, who, viewless as the wind, breathes into every soul that comes into the world. It is well to recall Renan's passionate protest against secularism. "Religion," he cries, "is not a popular error. It is a great truth of instinct, half-seen by the people—uttered by the people. Nothing is falser than the dream of certain persons who think to conceive a perfect humanity in conceiving it

without religion. We should put it just the other way. A perfect being would be no longer selfish, he would be wholly religious. The effect of progress, therefore, will be the expansion of religion, not its destruction or its decay."

By what marks would the Ideal Minister be known, were he to appear among us to-day? Let me name five, that seem, without doubt, to belong to him: Simplicity—unselfishness—humanness—hopefulness—reverence.

1. *Simplicity.*—The mark of the cleric, the pride of institutionalism, shall not be on him. He shall not seem to men to be clothed in a vesture of traditional claims, but quite to have forgotten himself in the joy and sorrow of his work. Those are charming words that Sir William Gairdner wrote about his old friend and colleague, Principal Caird: "No man ever crossed my path in life who impressed me more as a character of great simplicity and, I would almost say, homeliness; absolutely without affectation or parade, and, if not unconscious of his great gifts,—which of course he could not possibly be,—yet in all ordinary human intercourse behaving as if he were unconscious of them—a common man among common men. . . In everything that he did and said you came to feel that if any one else could have done it nearly as well, he would at once have gladly stood aside and yielded position as to an equal or superior. . . It was, indeed, this entire absence of self-seeking—and by this I mean not only unselfishness in the ordinary sense of the word, but also great inborn modesty and unobtrusiveness in all things for which men strive and assert themselves—that gave to his oratorical efforts their greatest charm to those who knew the man. He was conscious, as it appeared, only of the high matters with which he dealt, not of the person who was the instrument of dealing with them. In a very real sense of the words you would have said that, as a preacher, his life was 'hid with Christ in God.'"

I have thought it worth while to quote at length Sir William Gairdner's words about Caird, for they define most perfectly the quality that clothes, like an atmosphere, every true prophet of the highest things. He may be another Dean Arthur Penrhyn Stanley—an officer of state, wearing the jewel of a great order; an ecclesiastic, guiding the affairs of an august institution; a scholar, loaded with honors by his University; a courtier, admitted to the close friendship of his sovereign. But these, and all other accidents of earthly dignity, were forgotten by those who talked with him and heard him preach. For evidently these were not the major interests in his life. If he remembered them, he sought not after them to glory in them, nor counted them distinctions separating him from his brother men. "His soul was like a star and dwelt apart," in regions of the Spirit, where the great realities of experience are things that eye hath not seen nor ear heard. It was his perception of these things that disengaged him from the common

vanities and self-seekings of men and left him free for simple intercourse with others. Looking back after thirty years to radiant hours of fellowship with him in the Deanery at Westminster, I know that then I walked with one who walked with God, and I was not afraid, youth and dissenter that I was. His life was too great for pride, too high for churchmanship.

2. *Unselfishness.*—So long as the impersonal tradition of a church lends to its ministry a priestly status, there remains a chance for small and selfish men to hide their littleness beneath the cloak of authority. So long as a romantic ecclesiasticism weaves its spell over devout minds, there exists a tendency to idealize the actual minister into a sacerdotal symbol, and to cease from asking what kind of spirit lives beneath beauty of vestments and dignity of titles. The broad mantle of priesthood is perhaps a merciful concession to the frailty of men undertaking a difficult task. It affords measurable defense against publicity. But the possibility of shielding a man behind his office is passing by, as the glamor of tradition fades into the light of common day. The strenuous realism of a democratic age halts not at the threshold of the House of God. The ancient laying on of hands by the clergy enveloped the minister in a robe of mystery. The modern laying on of hands by the laity tears off that robe and cuts to the heart of things with the question, "What manner of man is this?" The priest stood amid the shadows of the sanctuary. The prophet stands in the open,—a living epistle, known and read of all men. It is a wonderful suggestion of One, who, long ago, stood in the common highway of the world, with the multitude thronging Him, having come not to be ministered unto but to minister, and to give His life a ransom for many. Of such temper and motive is the Ideal Minister. Unselfishness is, in him, not the name of the thing, but the thing itself. Obviously, his joy is in the spending of himself for others. Whereupon, when he speaks to men, they listen; when he summons them, they follow; for they know his voice, not the voice of his lips alone, but the voice of his life. Henri Frédéric Amiel put it well: "The Kingdom of God belongs not to the most enlightened but to the best, and the best man is the most unselfish man. Humble, constant, voluntary self-sacrifice—this is what constitutes the true dignity of man."

3. *Humanness.*—One may call the accent of personality the most subtle essence of a man's life. It is not so much what one says as the tone and disposition of the heart that speaks beneath the word and invests the being. The accent of personality in the Ideal Minister is humanness,—oneness with his brother men. He is not the defender of a system, nor the apologist of a school, nor the incumbent of an office, nor the propounder of a theory. He is near to human life; nobly magnanimous; understanding the ways of men and the forces that make them what they are. He has respect for humanity, esteeming

it the offspring of God. After the manner of One of whom it was said, "He knew what was in man," the Ideal Minister seems to have tasted every chalice of joy or sorrow, to have felt the faintness of the weak, the courage of the strong, the strain of the tempted, the contrition of the sinful. Men seem to find through him the clue to their own lives. They say one to another, "Come, see a man that told me all that ever I did." He knows the ways of children, and puts into words incommunicable thoughts throbbing within their souls. This humanness comes not forth from him with the cold precision of a theorist, but through the warm channels of intuitional experience. He has lived a thousand lives in one, assimilating through love the experiences of others so that they have become his own. He is thus a prophet of human life. Such a prophet must Frederick Robertson have been. Such, surely, in the days of his glorious prime, was Stopford Brooke, Robertson's biographer. I look back to years when it seemed worth while to cross the Atlantic on the chance of hearing one sermon from Stopford Brooke. For, whatever he failed to teach me, he seemed to have lived my life through before me, and to be putting into my hands the clue to the labyrinth.

4. *Hopefulness.*—I use the word in the grand, unconquerable sense in which Emerson, in the *New England Reformers,* cries, "Nothing shall warp me from the belief that every man is a lover of truth." It is a mark of the Ideal Minister that his intuitional oneness with humanity has taught him the majesty of the soul as an emanation from God, and the latent capacity of the soul for truth. He can have compassion on the ignorant and on them that are out of the way. Though he looks on sin with Godlike abhorrence, yet, like God, he can believe in a best that lives in the heart of the sinful. He can comprehend how a soul that seems to be an enemy of the truth may, in fact, be opposing some distorted or abandoned travesty of the truth, propounded by an age of superstition or surviving from an age of ignorance. The hopefulness of the Ideal Minister is born in part of appreciation of the nobler qualities of the soul (not less noble if dwarfed and thwarted by long disadvantage), and, in part, of critical discernment of truth's perpetual need of restatement in terms of contemporary experience. Upton, in his Hibbert Lectures, says, "Herein we see the immense value of the critical understanding, which is always at war with superstitious survivals, and, by its fresher and clearer insight into the facts of nature and mind, is always dissolving old and outworn forms of doctrinal conception and enabling the vital essence of religion to embody itself in higher and more adequate forms of expression." This conviction of the critical understanding, that truth is forever reincarnating itself in forms more perfectly expressing the purpose and meaning of the Spirit of God, supplies to the Ideal Minister the ground of his invincible hopefulness. His is a love that will not let men go. If they resist the truth he does not condemn them nor cast them

off. He examines his own heart with the question, "How can I so lift the truth above their misconceptions of it that they shall see it as it is, and know their inheritance as children of the Living God?" I sometimes think that the Ideal Minister, when he comes, will be drawn by the logic of opportunity to India and the Far East. A field of fields is there, just now, for men of vision, humanness, and hopefulness. It were a task worthy of Christ himself to go to the East believing in the love of truth that lies deep in the Oriental religious consciousness, beneath much practice of error; and so to lift the Eternal Message above age-long misconceptions of it that the imprisoned glory of the Eastern soul might be emancipated and installed in its proper office as the spiritual leader of the world.

5. *Reverence.*—In every great historical transition affecting our most valued inheritances there is danger of loss. The price of progress sometimes is very heavy. It is so in connection with Biblical criticism. Immense gains of knowledge have been paid for with immense losses of sentiment and feeling. Recovery of these losses one hopes for, but the result is problematical. It is so in connection with the ministry. The disintegration of priesthood under the piercing rays of science and democracy dispels an atmosphere that made its own contribution to the dignity and worth of existence. It was the atmosphere of reverence. Whether proceeding from truth or from fallacy, it made for the enriching of experience. It cast over the shrines and sacraments of religion a hush of sacredness. It checked the familiarity that breeds contempt. It redeemed large areas of life from sordid commonplaceness and hedged them about with suggestions of an invisible world. It gave awful authority to the pulpit, silencing doubt, rebuking sin, defining belief. What remains of this is a survival,—a balance of unexpended momentum from a past that cannot be reproduced. The new age has come and seated itself with nonchalance, if not with levity, in the seats of dissent. The loss to reverence has been enormous. The worst part of the loss is that it falls most heavily on those unconscious of it. The majority of our youth know not how much nearer God seemed to the fathers than to their children; how much more august and compelling seemed the services of religion and the voice of the ministry; how urgent the needs and satisfactions of the spiritual life; how open the avenues of eternity. There has been a great change. The leveling influence of democracy has done its part, diminishing traditional veneration for the clerically ordained. The hum of institutional activity has dispelled the ancient stillness of the sanctuary. The brisk utilitarianism of social science has introduced changes in church architecture and sacramental customs that break absolutely with the historic order. An astonishing flood of original methods has poured through the non-sacerdotal churches, producing a homely informality in religious affairs for which there

is no precedent in history. It is a dangerous time, for the reverence of the people is in peril.

The key to the situation is in the future, not in the past. We cannot go back and rehabilitate the tottering fabric of priesthood. "We cannot buy with gold the old associations." We can go forward toward the type of the Ideal Minister. For, to his simplicity, his unselfishness, his humanness, his hopefulness, he adds reverence, which gives to all these other qualities Divine significance and power. The reverence of the Ideal Minister is involuntary consciousness of the Unseen and the Eternal. As the touch of genius lifts the master above the mere musician, so this sense of the Unseen lifts the Ideal Minister above the mere preacher of sermons. It is the investiture of a priesthood verified not by tradition but by experience. It is immediacy of access to the eternal fountains of salvation. He lives among men as one of them, simple, unselfish, human, hopeful; yet they know that he walks with God,

> "And by the vision splendid
> Is on his way attended."

He is a scholar, but criticism has never violated that shrine of the Spirit where the pure in heart see God. The unfading newness of everlasting truth gives to his speech the freshness of springtime. The unsearchable mystery of Infinite Holiness gives to his thought and conduct gravity and reserve, as one who has beheld things which it is not possible for a man to utter. The demands of social service have not stamped him with the professionalism of a reformer. The ardor of churchmanship has not made him an ecclesiastic. He remains a prophet of the Highest. When he speaks, men feel that he is standing on holy ground. When he prays, men perceive that he is prostrating himself before the Risen Christ.

Approximations to the standard of the Ideal Minister are multiplying in these latter days, in the sacerdotal churches and in the non-sacerdotal churches. A type is developing that gives promise of a glorious future. It is familiar with the whole process of criticism, yet finds an apostolic gospel to preach that the spiritual sense of the modern world is waiting to hear. It is in sympathy with social service, yet permits not that, or anything else, to interfere with its first duty as an interpreter and mediator of God to man. It is in line with democratic reality, as between man and man, yet counts its high calling greater, not less, than traditional priesthood. Its supreme ambition is to be a true prophet of the Eternal Love, a faithful dispenser of the Eternal Truth, a redeeming brother, a child of light, a steward of the Kingdom of God.

As the air clears and recent confusions roll like storm-clouds from the sky, the glorious ambition of prophethood shall rise in the breast of youth. The ministry of the coming age shall include the choicest product of our universities. The manliest among men shall choose the highest among vocations.